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NOTES ON THE INTONATION OF SPOKEN FRENCH

By CLARA STOCKER

IT IS a recognized fact that every language has a melody of its own. All who have given attention to the study of spoken French, recognize this music, without which the most perfect reproduction of vowel and consonant sounds leaves the ear unsatisfied, and fails to seem convincingly French. It is as though one were to play correctly all the notes of a musical composition with no hint of interpretation.

How can a foreigner acquire the music of spoken French? Very little has been written on the subject. Daniel Jones' book, "Intonation Curves", which has texts accompanied by a curved line on a musical staff, is published in Germany, and difficult to obtain. *Les Trois Dictions* by Georges Berr and René Delbost contains some illuminating chapters on the subject, namely: "Les Intervalles de la Voix," "La Notation de quelques Inflections," and "De la Tonalité."

These chapters gave me the idea of jotting down in musical notation, during lectures, or at the French theater, such phrases as I was able to capture from speakers, actors, or from French people around me.

The following remarks and illustrations are the result of work done in this way. They are fragmentary and do not pretend to cover the ground, but are offered merely as an indication of what may yet be done in the field of French intonation and diction. The examples of intonation should be spoken, not sung. One may sing them first with the aid of a piano, then speak them following the melodic lines as nearly as possible. If this results in the intervals being slightly diminished or augmented, the illustrations will not necessarily lose their value. The important thing is to keep the design.

1. In ordinary, rapid narration, the voice generally rises a fourth, fifth or sixth on the last syllable of a stress group.

(a)

Valère, qui a vu ce qui se passait.

and descends about a fifth at the end of a sentence.

2. In slower speech, the voice often rises by degrees on the last two or three syllables of a stress group.

(a)

C'est pour ça que nous avons
(deux verbes.)

(b)

Je suis sûr que vous savez (pourquoi.)

At the end of a sentence, the descent may likewise be gradual.

(c)

(il se nourrissait) comme il pouvait.

(d)

et la fidélité.

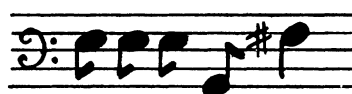
3. In animated narration or conversation, the voice, before rising on the last syllable, may descend on the next to the last syllable of a stress group.

(a)



en un mot,

(b)



heureusement pour lui,

Likewise, at the end of a sentence, the voice may rise before the final descent.

(c)



essentiellement sévère.

(d)



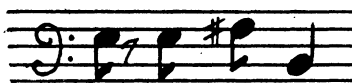
doit se faire sentir.

(e)



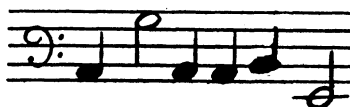
je viens vous parler.

(f)



moi, je l'ai vu.

(g)



je veux qu'on soit sincère
"Le Misanthrope" Act I, Scene 1

4. Note the slide down, in (c) and (d) of the last paragraph. This slide from a high note often denotes emphasis.

(a)



Ces maitres de tout ordre



Les fleurs ne sont pas pareilles.



on m'la dit hier!



Elle était toute seule!



Je n'ai pas l'adresse! Je n'ai pas l'adresse!

The last illustration, (e) represents the intonation used by a woman who was emphatically relating a very embarrassing circumstance.

4. Asperity often causes the voice to leap up an octave or more, with a breaking off of the voice on the high note. No descent or slide.



Mais non, Mad'moiselle
(Mademoiselle has been guilty of an
unreasonable question.)



Quel animal!
(Mariane at seeing Orgon
L'Avare, Act III, Scene I)



Gardez la bague!

(Frosine impatient, *L'Avare* Act III Scene XII.)



Aidez-moi donc, au moins, à en épouser un autre

Marceline, *Mariage de Figaro*, Act III, Scene IV.)

5. A characteristic melody, used often in enumeration, begins on a low note, rises a sixth, more or less, and descends at the end of a stress group about a fourth. The intervals vary, of course, but the design remains the same. The rise is always on the next to the last syllable. This intonation is one of the first to be noticed by foreigners, because of its markedly musical quality.



Another enumeration melody resembles the first example given here, with a marked rise on the last syllable of the stress group. See illustration 1, a.

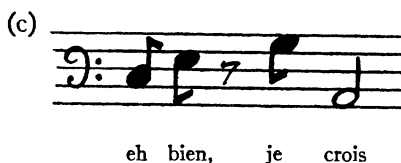
6. A lecturer heard last winter, uttered the phrase,



Later on, becoming more animated, he said,



with a rising of the voice on the next to the last syllable. A much livelier speaker said



Still another, whose discourse was, for the most part, in a minor key, said:



descending a fourth instead of a fifth. All of these examples show a downward interval at the end of the stress group; all but one rise before the final descent, illustrating the same principles of intonation. They show that two or more French people interpreting a phrase in the same manner, thereby using the same approximate intonation, do not necessarily speak in the same key, nor use precisely the same intervals. This bears out what was said at the beginning of this article. It is extremely difficult to read the examples with a speaking voice, and keep the intervals just as they are written. The main thing is the melodic design.

As for the examples quoted from the stage, it is recognized that other actors interpreting the passages differently, would use different inflections of voice. There is therefore nothing arbitrary about the illustrations given. They are simply offered as examples of the intonation of certain phrases and types of phrases, and are authentic as far as melodic design is concerned, having been taken directly from the utterances of French people.

Paul Passy says (*Les Sons du Français*, page 68) that in singing, each syllable is pronounced on a given note, and in passing from one tone to another, the voice bounds without intermediate tones; while in speech, the voice glides by imperceptible degrees over all the tones lying between the notes on which two syllables are pronounced. That is one reason why such illustrations as are submitted here lose their value when sung. If one speaks them one necessarily and unconsciously supplies these vague intermediate tones. Another reason is, obviously, the difference in quality between the singing and the speaking voice.

As a stressed syllable is always accompanied by a rise or fall of the voice, I have found that pupils with a tendency to accent the first syllable of a French word, often find it easier to overcome this fault when the teacher emphasizes the intonation of a phrase rather than the accent.

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